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## **Photography As Dialogue: Introduction to Special Issue of Photography & Culture**

**Tiffany Fairey and Liz Orton**

**Tiffany Fairey**

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Dr. Tiffany Fairey is a visual sociologist specializing in participatory and community photography. She is Research Associate in the Department of War Studies at Kings College, London and a member of Photography and the Archive Centre (PARC), University of the Arts, London. Co-founder and former director of PhotoVoice, in 2010 she was awarded the Royal Photographic Society's Hood Medal for outstanding advance in photography for public service.

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Liz Orton is a visual artist and educator whose work explores ideas of authorship and ownership in photography. She is an Associate Artist with Performing Medicine, an Associate Lecturer in Photography at the London College of Communication and teaches at Kings College London and the Royal Hospital London. Liz has run numerous community photography projects including with PhotoVoice and The Photographers' Gallery. She exhibits widely, has recently had residencies at York Museum and Kew Gardens and her projects have been supported by the Wellcome Trust, Mead Fellowship and UCL Grand Challenges.

About 10 years ago we started sending each other images, back and forth, via email. Each photograph had to respond to the one just received. We have so far exchanged over 260 photographs, sharing snippets of family life, abstraction, travels, loss and humor. When we started, we had no particular plan but rather we were curious about the idea of photography as dialogue and we wanted to see how our visual conversation would develop.

A similar sense of open-ended inquiry informs this special issue which does not present a single resolved idea but explores the emergent, messy and indeterminate ways that images and image-making serve to facilitate - and obscure - dialogue. It is concerned with the potential and limits of photography as a dialogical medium and proposes an idea of dialogic photography that centres around the encounters, exchanges and negotiations that happen with, through and around images.

Writers like Ariella Azoulay and others see photography as an ongoing event involving multiple participants. They call for a renewed articulation of photography that moves us away from a singular, vertical focus on the work of specific photographers and seeks to understand photography as a 'certain form of human being-with-others in which the camera or photography are

implicated'<sup>1</sup>. Photography as dialogue focuses on photography as a social, networked, communicative and political activity enmeshed in webs of power, resistance and agency through which we assert and explore a sense of self and relation to others.

This dialogical potential has always been part of photography but has so far been under-explored as a framework for understanding how photography acts and mediates human relations. This special issue is concerned with how images and image-making can enable exchanges in which positions are explored and possibly challenged and transformed. It begins with the idea that 'a photograph is a product of an encounter and the start of a conversation'<sup>2</sup>. From this we ask: what is particular about the 'deep and interesting talk'<sup>3</sup> that happens through and with images? Bringing together disparate projects and perspectives, this special issue is less interested in the image itself and more with what arises through and around the image, with the relations that extend out from a photograph.

Understanding photography as dialogue moves beyond the broad postmodern critique of representation to more closely examine power and voice in specific communication practices: who is visible, who is speaking and what shapes participation in the dialogue? Images have a discursive agency; they work 'inaudibly but powerfully' to frame the conditions of possibility within which politics take place.<sup>4</sup> Many of the featured projects explore how photography as [or as a catalyst for] dialogue can disrupt dominant hierarchies and histories. However, we remain wary of what might be called 'dialogical determinism'<sup>5</sup> and of the strain of romanticism that has come to characterise rhetorical claims about photography's capacity to give voice and enable participation and collaboration. We do not assume that dialogical photography can in itself overcome systemic differences in power or can radically transform social relations. Dialogical exchanges can be limited and superficial as much as they can be transformative and emancipatory. They can exclude. They can be curtailed and co-opted. They involve tension, negation and inequities. But they can also point to what is common.

The projects featured in this issue are all collaboratively or collectively produced. Photography is understood as a series of shared, applied and unfinished processes, enabling thinking, feeling and exchange as much as seeing. Images are revealed as unstable spaces where meanings are sought and negotiated rather than given. The contributors make visible some of the ways in which photographic relations enable dialogue, for its own sake as well as for artistic, social, political and educational ends. They decentre the typical focus on

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<sup>1</sup> Azoulay, Ariella. 2012. *Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography*. New York: Verso. P18

<sup>2</sup> Palmer, Daniel. 2017. *Photography and Collaboration*. Bloomsbury. p 15

<sup>3</sup> Harper, Douglas. 2002. 'Talking about Pictures: A Case for Photo Elicitation'. *Visual Studies* 17 (1), p 23

<sup>4</sup> Bleiker, Roland, ed. 2018. *Visual Global Politics*. London: Routledge. p 19

<sup>5</sup> Kester, Grant. 1999. 'Dialogical Aesthetics: A Critical Framework For Littoral Art'. *Variant* 9: 1–8. p.5

the photographer and consider instead the network of relations made active through photographic acts.

The issue considers dialogues between individuals and communities in multiple ways: between artists; between young people in divided communities; between different generations; between those who cannot see and those who can; between researchers and photographic subjects. The focus is on the character of dialogical exchange, its meanings and effects at specific points and times.<sup>6</sup>

The framework of photography as dialogue is evoked to make connections between scattered examples where communities, researchers and artists are using photography to carve out and open up spaces for conversations. To value dialogue is to value the space between people not as a sign of disconnection but as a potential for exchange, for movement in feeling, position or understanding, however small. This space between is where photographs find potential, as moments for connection, that open up histories, interpretations and futures. Photographs, be they digital files on a screen or physical prints, can be touched, felt, handled, pondered and, especially, moved. They provide a focus and can create a distance between the subject and the image which can open up a reflexive space in which dialogue thrives.

### **What is dialogue?**

Our ideas borrow from histories and philosophies of dialogue in which theorists emphasise exchange as a process of being with and being open to others and explore the question of what constitutes meaningful dialogue.

From the 80s, David Bohm, a theoretical physicist, pioneered the idea of dialogue groups, where 20-40 people come together to talk and listen to one another and to have a free-flowing conversation in which assumptions are suspended and opinions explored. Feeling that communication was breaking down everywhere on an 'unparalleled scale'<sup>7</sup>, the aim of Bohm's method was to tackle social isolation and fragmentation, by building trust and bringing people closer together. Believing that shared meaning was the basis of culture, he asserted dialogue as a way to develop 'coherent meaning'.<sup>8</sup>

Bohm's ideas have been applied in fields from organisational development to peace building. He evokes dialogue as a process, in which participants come together to try to understand their differing beliefs and to go deeper, to observe how thought functions. For Bohm, there are no firm rules, nor an overt agenda. Dialogue is an unfolding process that, at its essence, is about learning<sup>9</sup>.

There is a more explicit transformative agenda in the Brazilian education theorist Paulo Freire's conception of dialogue which is a fundamental part of his

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<sup>6</sup> ibid page 4

<sup>7</sup> Bohm, David. 1996. *On Dialogue*. New York: Routledge. p. 1

<sup>8</sup> ibid p2

<sup>9</sup> Bohm, David, D Factor, and P Garrett. 1991. 'Dialogue - A Proposal'. [http://www.david-bohm.net/dialogue/dialogue\\_proposal.html](http://www.david-bohm.net/dialogue/dialogue_proposal.html). No page

emancipatory problem-posing approach to education (most famously articulated in his 1970s book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*). This sees students and teachers come together to learn from one another in an environment characterized by respect and equality. Political agency is central to a Freirian notion of dialogue. He proposes it as a means by which people realise a form of political and critical consciousness, through encounters with others in which the world is named and existing thoughts are challenged.<sup>10</sup> Those encounters and conversations create new knowledge and make change possible.

These two conceptions point to a tension over whether dialogue is understood as an open-ended process or is motivated by a particular purpose. For Bohm, the purpose of dialogue is exploratory as goals get in the way of the emergence of shared meaning and communication.<sup>11</sup> Its value lies in experiencing the world of and with others, and thus it cannot be overly controlled or managed. Dialogue is unstable and involves multiplicity and contradiction. Bohm and Freire recognise that such processes can be frustrating and involve disagreement, but that they have the potential to engage with difference and deepen understanding.<sup>12</sup> In visual terms, it evokes what we have called elsewhere an ever-shifting form of 'photography of becoming'.<sup>13</sup>

Dialogue is traditionally understood to be based in speech and language. Since photography's invention there have been repeated claims that it is a universal language<sup>14</sup>, and yet no dictionary exists. The visual world is made up of an abundance of languages each with its own history, variations, dialects and accents. Images, with their multiple registers of meaning, defy literal translation and definition yet we share visual codes and cultures. Our own experimentation with visual correspondence led us to reflect on whether such an exchange would be possible if we did not share a visual language.<sup>15</sup> Is a common visual vocabulary essential for photo dialogue?

The Russian semiotician, Mikhail Bakhtin pushed the idea of dialogue beyond the verbal, designating it as an embodied activity that takes place through gestures, facial expressions, social behaviour and apparel as well as through words. He argued that dialogical relations presuppose a language, but do not reside within

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<sup>10</sup> Freire, Paulo. 1970. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. 2Rev Ed. London: Penguin.

<sup>11</sup> Bohm, David. 1996. *On Dialogue*. New York: Routledge. p. 149

<sup>12</sup> Freire, Paulo. 1998. *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum.

<sup>13</sup> Fairey uses the notion of a 'photography of becoming' to re-animate understandings of a pluralised form of participatory photography and the intuitive and emergent politics of voice it entails. See Fairey, Tiffany. 2015. 'Whose Pictures Are These? Re-Framing the Promise of Participatory Photography'. Goldsmiths, University of London. P.206, Conclusion: A Photography of Becoming

<sup>14</sup> It was the German photographer August Sander who in 1931 first spoke of photography as a universal language and the idea has since been absorbed into the popular lexicon of photography. August Sander, 'Lecture 5: Photography as a Universal Language', 1931, *The Massachusetts Review*, vol.19, no.4, Winter 1978, pp.674–9.

<sup>15</sup> Fairey, Tiffany, and Liz Orton. 2015. 'Photo-Dialogue: A Conversation between Tiffany Fairey and Liz Orton'. <http://tiffanyfairey.co.uk/dialogue-text>.

the system of language.<sup>16</sup> The dialogic potential of photography then, extends beyond visual semiotics to include an expanded and embodied set of practices involving making photographs, talking about photographs, looking at photographs and listening to their silences<sup>17</sup>.

For both Bohm and Freire modesty, love, humility and respect, rather than language, are the key pre-requisites for dialogue. Trust is both an outcome of and a precondition for dialogue. Our own exchange of photos was for quite a few years our only mode of engagement, across 5000 miles. We shared more than we had verbally and became involved in new aspects of each other's lives. It was born of instinct and curiosity, and a reciprocal trust emerged as it evolved.

Trust and shared meaning can take time to develop. Our own photo dialogue has lasted more than 10 years. Other dialogues discussed in this issue have evolved over years and decades, deepening over repeated encounters, and often remaining unfinished and unresolved.

### **What does photography as a form of dialogue look like?**

These articles foreground a range of practices and ideas that imagine and develop the dialogical possibilities of images. Siobhan Warrington and Edward Ademolu's conversation speaks to the paradoxical potential of the image to both shut down and open up plural perspectives. They converse around a shared concern for which voices are being heard (and listened to) in debates around NGO image-making. Re-positioning diaspora audiences and the subjects of NGO images as active contributors to and actors within the image-making process, their research projects both raise the question of whose interests these NGO images serve? As social science researchers Warrington and Ademolu employ photo-elicitation<sup>18</sup>, using images directly with research participants to generate conversations around representation. While their research highlights photography's capacity to mis-represent and perpetuate racial stereotypes, their methods harness the photograph's potential to open up new spaces, prompt critical reflection and 'speak back' to the images and image-makers.

Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh's work emerges out of a decade of sustained engagement with people in Burj al-Shamali, a Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon, about their photographs. She writes that 'photography has been our tool for conversation and the pretext to spend time together and be affected by each other'(ref). Her article describes an extended process of gathering images for a digital depository that has sought to accommodate people's plural motives for collecting photographs, and to unfold the oppressed histories in which they and their images are implicated.

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<sup>16</sup> Bakhtin, M. 1986. *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. University of Texas Press.

<sup>17</sup> Camp, Tina M. *Listening to Images*. Duke University Press, 2017.

<sup>18</sup> Photo elicitation is a visual research method employed by social researchers that uses images in interviews and focus groups to elicit information, insights and knowledge.



Eid-Sabbagh wants to extend our concept of the photograph, to re-imagine it as composed of multiple meta-medial layers that animate and make central the emotions, hopes and privacies of the people who took and kept the photographs. She conceives of photographs as complex constructs 'of relations, time, vulnerabilities, narrations, hopes, refusals and silences' (ref). Making the ongoing dialogue between these layers visible as part of their viewing Eid Sabbagh enlarges the emancipatory possibilities of the archive.

Nepal Picture Library (NPL) is, similarly, concerned with extending and complicating conceptions of the archive. NayanTara Gurung Kakshapati and Kelly Hussey-Smith describe NPL's recent *Feminist Memory Project* and its work to uncover obscured stories of women. In their view, the incompleteness of the archive and its failure to hitherto record these stories, is not so much a deficiency as an opportunity for dialogue. NPL's collection is built through citizen contributions and dialogic participation where archive managers engage in extended conversations about the images through interviews, workshops, exhibitions and collaborations with researchers and curators. The purpose of these manifold engagements is to create a 'visually dense' version of Nepali history for and crucially with public audiences.

Collaborative history-making also lies at the heart of Sireita Mullings' account of *Voices from the Front Line*. The project saw young people from Lambeth using photography to uncover the social, cultural and political heritage of Brixton's Railton Road, an important gathering place for South London's Caribbean community that became famous as the street where the Brixton social uprisings of the eighties began, and now a site of rapid gentrification. Mulling's descriptions of the encounters and conversations that ensued provide evocative illustrations of how photography, as a catalyst for memory and making connections, facilitated a purposeful, intergenerational process of remembering that enabled the young people to explore aspects of Black British cultural and political history not taught in school.

In these projects from Lebanon, Nepal and South London, photography as a form of dialogue creates active, localised archives that have been silenced by dominant visual histories. Gemma Rose Turnbull reviews another work, Patrick Waterhouse's book, *Restricted Images*, that uses collaborative photography to re-negotiate history: that of the colonial and culturally invasive representation of Aboriginal people and places. Inviting Aboriginal artists to "restrict and amend"<sup>19</sup> his photographs (images which he had made of them) with their painting (dot patterns that are elements of traditional storytelling), Waterhouse proposes to symbolically return agency over their images to Aboriginal communities. The resulting images are captivating but Turnbull urges caution as it is unclear how much control the Aboriginal participants have had over the final published collection of images. Warning of the ease with which many 'slip into disingenuous modes of 'collaboration' (ref), an increasingly prevalent issue as collaborative practices gain popularity, Turnbull points out that insufficient

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<sup>19</sup> Waterhouse, Patrick. 2018. *Restricted Images: Made with the Warlpiri of Central Australia*. Self Publish, Be Happy. Introduction.

detail is provided about the image-making process to evaluate how much agency the Aboriginal artists have had.

Anthony Luvera and Benedict Burbridge's conversation expands the critical discussion around socially engaged arts by focusing on funding and commissioning practices. At its core a discussion about power and who benefits, Luvera and Burbridge wonder why conversations about financing are excluded from the narratives around such projects? Luvera describes the delicate institutional and community relationships that artists navigate when undertaking socially engaged work. For Burbridge, that these processes are often silenced in the final viewing experience points to telling power relations. They remind us that despite claims to challenge hierarchies, such projects often only do this in prescribed ways and at certain stages.

Daniel Palmer's essay identifies another manifestation of dialogical practice that has emerged in recent years: artist-led photographic exchange and correspondence projects or, as he calls them, photo-dialogues, similar to our own. Exploring four projects in which artists have sent images back and forth to each other, one web-based, another using Instagram, one using camera phones and one via email, Palmer probes the parameters of the shared visual language in such projects. He locates their emergence out of networked digital photography which has seen photography shift from being primarily about memory to a more 'conversational' mode of social communication. Artist-led photo-dialogues are both a response to a potential, Palmer writes, and an attempt to develop a new form of exchange, that often has no specific end point and in which participants playfully experiment with connections and patterns between images. Palmer points out that these artist-to-artist exchanges, despite their collaborative form, tend to highlight the subjectivity of each photographer's approach.

The Seeing With Photography Collective (SWPC) presents us with a form of dialogical photography in which subjectivities become interwoven in a shared compulsion to create images that convey the visions of those that see, but not with their eyes. The group of visually impaired, sighted and totally blind photographers from New York City have been working together for 20 years and have developed a process that is both highly intuitive and technical. With the camera shutter left open for minutes at a time, in darkened rooms they use torches to improvise scenes creating images that are their own form of magical realism: dream-like, disorientating and iridescent. The blind photographers, with varying levels of visibility, know their photographs through the descriptions of those that can see them. This is a slow and deliberate form of photography determined to overcome the limitations of the visual and to expand our notions both of photography and of what it means to see.

Our final two contributions turn to countries recovering from conflict and atrocity. Zoe Norridge reviews Piotr Cieplak's documentary, *The Faces We Lost*, in which he talks with Rwandans, survivors of the 1994 genocide, about the photographs they do and do not have, of their loved ones. Norridge writes that family photos of those who were killed play an essential role in commemoration and grieving in Rwanda. Over various interviews the film gently explores how



people remember, both with and without photographs. Recognising that his academic research and analysis 'can offer nothing'<sup>20</sup> to those who suffered the genocide, Norridge affirms how Cieplak's film reveals how people, in dialogue with their images and memories, live with loss and atrocity.

In *The Faces We Lost* Adeline Umuhoza, who only knows her father through his portrait, draws strength through her imagined conversations with him via his photograph. This potential of the image to provide solace, to construct a sense of self and a history is also central to Belfast Exposed's community photography work. Established during The Troubles, Belfast Exposed has worked for 30 years to catalyse conversations that build relations and support the peace process. In *One Photo*, Tiffany Fairey considers an image in which young people have digitally removed the peace wall that they live alongside. In doing so they visualise something that does not yet exist in Belfast: the unsegregated landscape of a city without walls. The leading peace theorist, John Paul Lederach, argues that change happens when people 'language themselves' into new realities through conversations and stories that spark the moral imagination.<sup>21</sup> These young people demonstrate how photography has a role to play as they work to create images that 'envision themselves' into new landscapes.

## Dialogue and Hope

Dialogical photography is laden with aspirations; hopes that creating images together, looking at images together and talking about images together will help us to understand, see and co-exist better. Photography as dialogue plays with potentiality, helping to generate new forms of co-constructed knowledge, previously silenced histories, expanded ways of seeing, new relations across difference, across generations and across life and loss. Such projects and approaches value the instability of photographs, their refusal to be pinned down, and their capacity to generate and renew social, cultural and political conversations.

Dialogue cannot exist without hope<sup>22</sup>. Our hope for this issue is that, by offering dialogue as a framework for thinking about photography, it expands the way we imagine its possibilities and stimulates new conversations. Susan Meiselas has likened finding a photograph to picking up a piece from a jigsaw puzzle box with the cover missing. There is no sense of the whole but rather each image is a part of something yet to be revealed. Bringing together a range of different visual pieces and practices, community projects, artist collaborations, a film and performance, as well as social research and archival initiatives, we hope this issue contributes to a broadened interest in the capacities and limits of images to realise new forms of agency and conversation.

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<sup>20</sup> Cieplak, Piotr. 2017. *Death, Image, Memory: The Genocide in Rwanda and Its Aftermath in Photography and Documentary Film*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. p. 3

<sup>21</sup> Lederach, John Paul. 2005. *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>22</sup> Freire, Paulo. 1970. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. 2Rev Ed. London: Penguin.

